Worthy Daughters

and Sons of

Lao people

NEO LAO HAKSAT PUBLICATIONS — 1966

WORTHY DAUGHTERS AND SONS OF LAO PEOPLE

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1966

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CONTENTS

	Page
Publisher's note	9
Thao Nao, a brilliant fighter	11
The girl of the mountains of Luangprabang	23
A 250-kilometre pursuit	33
I paid a visit to the people of Nakhe	53
We can defeat them	61
The joys and sorrows of a young Lao girl	71
Si Thoong the invincible	81

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The signing of the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Indochina, by recognizing the national sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Laos as well as Vietnam and Cambodia, put an end to French domination in Indochina.

The long and hard war of resistance of the Lao people against the French colonialists ended in victory.

But the American imperialists immediately took the place of the French colonialists. To achieve their aim of turning Laos into a neo-colony and a military base for aggression, they were quick, through economic "aid", to foster a clique of traitors, rig up a puppet administration and organize an army of mercenaries. These are tools in the service of their "special war", in fact their neo-colonialist war of aggression in Laos. The country's liberated areas have been savagely bombed by Phantoms, Thunderchiefs, Sabres since May 1964, and recently even by B. 52s.

Over the last twelve years, and especially since the signing of the 1962 Geneva Agreement, Laos should

have enjoyed peace and the Lao people should have been free to devote themselves to national rehabilitation and building. But up to now, because of the crimes perpetrated by the Americans, the Lao people have continued to shed blood and tears. That is why they have no alternative but to rise up again to struggle against the imperialist aggressors and their valets, the clique of traitors.

Under the leadership of the Neo Lao Haksat headed by Prince Souphanouvong, our entire people, united as one man, have engaged in a resolute struggle against the invaders, for a peaceful, neutral, independent, democratic, reunified and prosperous Laos.

In the course of this sacred struggle, large numbers of worthy daughters and sons of the Fatherland have emerged from all nationalities of the Lao community. On the military front as well as in political action, they have evinced the traditional heroism of an indomitable people, confident of final victory in their national-liberation struggle.

In 1964, the Second Congress of Army Heroes of the Lao People reviewed and, in the name of the nation, praised numerous exploits of our fighters.

By presenting in this booklet a number of those exploits, we hope that these stories founded on true facts will help the reader better understand our people who deeply love peace but stand ready to endure every sacrifice for the independence and freedom of the nation.

June 1966

Neo Lao Haksat Publications

THAO NAO,
A BRILLIANT FIGHTER

by THAO BOUN LIN

ON the night of March 3, 1961, I arrived at the Salaphoukhoun crossroads. This was a rather wellknown place, for it was there that the Pathet Lao armed forces had foiled an advance by the Americans and their puppets, who had tried to force their way into the Plain of Jars through a large-scale attack.

From an artillery emplacement, I followed a trench up the slope of Phousoung Hill to an outpost located on top. It was perhaps two in the morning, a spring morning, and it was quite cold. In underground shelters covered with round logs, our fighters were sleeping on wooden planks, wrapped in warm blankets.

I asked to see Thao Nao. The man on duty told me that he was on the look-out post, adding hastily:

"There are nineteen of us here, including Thao Nao, the commander. Fighting and guard duty hardly leave us any time for rest. So, when one of us is sick, Thao Nao replaces him on the watch-tower."

At three in the morning, Thao Nao was back. As soon as he saw me, he threw his arms round my neck without even removing his rifle and cartridge belt:

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "How happy I am to see you, brother!"

It is easy to guess the emotion felt by two soldiers who had known each other in battle and who met again after a long separation. For me Thao Nao was like a young brother: he had been with us in so many episodes of the revolutionary war.

When I told him the reason for my coming to Sala-phoukhoun, he again warmly embraced me:

"So you are now a war correspondent. Good! Come with us at any time and in any place. We won't let the Americans lay a finger on you!"

"Never mind the Yanks, brother. I know their worth!"

We discussed a programme of work, then I told him to lie down and have a good sleep, but he refused, saying he didn't need one. But the rings under his eyes belied what he said. So I insisted that he should go to bed. No sooner had he lain down than he started snoring. Poor chap! I knew he would rather sit up all night talking with me.

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I remember the day when I had met him for the first time. The picture is as clear in my mind as if the whole thing had happened only yesterday. Our combat group was to carry out a propaganda mission at

Dakcaleup, a small village inhabited by Kaxing minority people in the district of Sansay, Attopeu province, at the foot of the Indochina Range. The rain caught us when we were only a short distance from the village, and we took shelter in a hut on the side of the path. A young boy also came running to the hut, clad in an indigo loincloth. When he saw the little hut already full of people, he stopped with a perplexed look. Rain water was trickling on his body, on the crossbow of *teck* wood slung over his shoulder, on his quiver and on his bush-knife hanging from his waist. We beckoned to him to enter. To our questions, he gave only brief answers.

"Where are you going ?"

"School."

"What's your name ?"

"Thao Nao."

"Nice name. How old are you ?"

"Don't know."

"How many brothers and sisters have you ?"

"Never count them."

It was only when the rain had stopped and we had started out on the path again that he asked :

"Brothers, you are Itsalas, aren't you ?" *

"How do you know ?" I asked him. But I got no answer.

At Dakcaleup, we visited every home in fulfilment of our mission. Like the other families, Thao Nao's

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* Members of the Free Laos Front (Ed).

lived exclusively from the products of a patch of burnt-out forest clearing. Wild beasts often came to ravage the crops, and taxes took the major part of the harvests. The loss of national independence had made the Lao people the slaves of colonialism, and how hard their condition was !

Thao Nao's old mother said :

"Yes, you are right, my sons. Our fellow-villagers must have warm clothes for the winter and good bush-knives for clearing the forest ; our girls should no longer be reduced to covering their bodies with tree-bark, and mothers nursing their babies should have rice to eat, and not only bamboo shoots !"

Tears welled up in Thao Nao's eyes. This taciturn and rough-mannered boy was in fact very sensitive.

Some time later, we left Dakcaleup for another village. As we started on the path, we saw Thao Nao waiting for us at the side of the track.

"Let me go with you, brothers," he said.

"We're going to Daktyet," we said, "what are you going to do there ?"

He remained silent, his eyes glued to the ground.

"I have nothing to do at Daktyet," he answered at last. "I want to go with you to wage the revolution. Just like you. To wage the revolution so that the Kaxing and all other Lao people will no longer have to suffer misery and humiliation."

Since then, Thao Nao worked as our guide, courier and cook. He also participated in our activities. Soon he became a very good guerilla. In the spring of 1954, I saw him donning a soldier's uniform. After the signing of the Geneva Agreements, the armed forces

went to the regrouping areas in Samneua and Phongsaly provinces. Thao Nao and I went with different units, and we hadn't seen each other since.

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The whole of Salaphoukhoun was still shrouded in the morning mist. But the enemy artillery was rumbling without respite. At noon, there was a lull, and Thao Nao took me to the observation post. He told me that there had been days when the small hill opposite had received more than a thousand shells, and its red earth had turned brown. The wind coming from there brought us a smell of powder, burnt grass and calcined earth. Facing us, and about one kilometre away, there were enemy advanced positions on a hill called Sensi, and further away, we saw the arc of Road 13, and, on the roadside, a two-storeyed bungalow which looked like a blockhouse. From those advanced positions, enemy artillery was pounding away day and night at the ridge of Phousoung, which had by now become something like a burnt-out forest clearing. This beautiful-looking hill, formerly covered with coffee plants which, when in bloom, put white splashes on the green background, was now barren and lifeless.

"I had told my comrades," Thao Nao said, "that if we knew how to dig galleries into the mountain like the pangolin, enemy artillery and aircraft wouldn't be able to do us any harm. For them it would be just like trying to dig wells in the river. But if we didn't dig any trenches and galleries, the enemy could break our

skulls by merely throwing stones at us ! The comrades had listened to me and spent much time and effort digging shelters. Hardly had we finished digging them when the enemy started their attack. After a violent artillery preparation, about one hundred of them tried to crawl up the slope of Phousoung. I sent a five-man team with a light machine-gun on the enemy's left. The rest of us, fourteen men in all, just sat tight in our trenches, determined to wait until enemy troops had come within close range, to mow them down. But they were chicken-hearted bastards: when we opened fire all of them just dropped flat on their bellies, and it was hard to tell which of them had been hit. Behind them, their commanders shouted orders and fired pistol shots, but to no avail. None of them budged an inch. They just hugged the soil tightly and fired at random. Even if their chiefs had tickled the back of their necks with a bayonet, they would have refused to raise their heads ! Why should they risk their lives when they could just stay where they were and squander American ammuniton ? To tell the truth, not all of them succeeded in saving their hides, for our men were crack shots. Then our five-man group sneaked down the hill-slope and opened a raking fire on their flank. Panic-stricken, they took to their heels, leaving their dead, whom we had to bury ourselves, using the craters dug by their artillery."

Anger suddenly came into Thao Nao's voice and his features hardened.

"Then," he continued his story, "the enemy became more furious than wolves deprived of their prey. Some days they launched no less than five attacks ! Once,

they hurled against us four battalions, comprising Lao, Thai, South Vietnamese and Chiang Kai-shek Chinese mercenaries, officered by Yanks. Their bombers, tanks and cannons rained fire and steel on Phousoung."

I looked at Thao Nao. Life in the combat trenches was quite hard. His body had become thinner, his features had hardened and his eyes were sunken. His thick lips had turned blue. There was a grim beauty on the face of this fierce fighter.

That night, on my insistence, he told me about the battles, about thirty of them, in which he had participated since our separation : Namoong, Papet, Huoioun, Naophouluang, Huoivang, Nampac, Patrong, Namnga...

He didn't say much about his own exploits. But later I learned more about them from his comrades. Gradually I was able to patch up the stories of several battles, among them that of Namnga.

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Namnga was a strategic position on the Luangprabang - Phongsaly road, defended by an enemy battalion. Our forces had decided to attack it.

The first day of the attack, a height bristling with blockhouses, five in all, was overrun by one of our platoons. But on the second day the platoon commander was wounded and Thao Nao was appointed to replace him. He reorganized the platoon into two

squads, equipped with a light machine-gun each. At dusk, he launched them against a second height, which had been reinforced by the enemy. The latter tried to stop us through a barrage of fire. "Their guns were howling like wolves at the approach of a storm !" said a young soldier. But none of our fighters let himself be driven back. Our own mortars were firing. As soon as they lengthened their range, Thao Nao ordered a full-scale assault. Soon, however, he was wounded by a mine. Blood trickled on his face and dimmed his sight. After having his wound bandaged, he continued to lead his men forward. Now, the enemy were throwing grenades at us. But we hurled ours at them, killing or wounding fifteen. The rest showed a clean pair of heels ! The sixth and seventh blockhouses fell into our hands almost at the same time. An automatic weapon fired on us from the eighth, obliquely. Deputy squad leader Kham La was killed. In a hoarse voice, Boun Mi shouted to Thao Nao :

"Carry on the attack on Blockhouse n° 8. Let's avenge Kham La !"

Thao Nao led his squad to the left of the enemy position, while Boun Mi led his to the right. Soon the enemy machinegun was silenced. With grenades, our troops made away with the defenders of Blockhouse n° 8.

When he was about to launch the final assault, Thao Nao was wounded a second time. Under the light of star-shells, Boun Mi saw his jacket splashed with blood.

At dawn on the third day, our mortars started pounding at the last enemy stronghold. Our recoilless guns were brought at close range and blasted enemy defences. Thao Nao led his squad in the direction of Blockhouse n° 9, already clouded in smoke. But after a few steps, he collapsed. Before him, two bunkers were spitting fire and hampered our advance.

As the company commander was hurrying towards Thao Nao, the latter, as if a miraculous strength had come to him, sprang to his feet and put himself at the head of his squad. "Forward !" the men cried excitedly at the sight of their chief. But again Thao Nao fell, unconscious.

When he came to, Boun Mi's voice was whispering in his ear, "Complete victory for us, brother !" He had been carried by Boun Mi into a trench and seated with his back leaned against its wall. Now, the guns were silent. Only our megaphones were blaring, calling on the enemy survivors to surrender. Three hundred of them were coming out of their shelters, like mountain crabs after rain. More than two hundred weapons of all types and heaps of ammunition were lying about, like tree branches cut down by a typhoon.

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At Salaphoukhoun, the hard defensive phase had come to an end. Thao Nao's platoon received the order to get ready for the offensive.

"Boun Lin," he asked me, "would you like to pursue the enemy with us ?"

"That's what I came here for," I replied.

Our soldiers were obviously glad to take the offensive. They beat drums, played flutes and danced. Some however, wont to live in underground galleries, asked themselves how they were going to face planes and artillery in the open. Thao Nao guessed their thoughts. He told them :

"Up to now, we have lived in underground tunnels and galleries, like pangolins, to preserve ourselves from air and artillery strikes. But we are not going to remain there indefinitely, like a snail in its shell. When the time comes we shall act like the tiger who leaves his lair and jumps on his prey !"

Thao Nao divided his platoon into two columns. One, led by Chum, followed the road. The other, under his own command, climbed up the slope of the mountain. He was putting into practice his customary tactics. When together with other units, his columns were within range of the enemy, order was given them to open fire on two outposts. The enemy withdrew hastily. Following up this victory, our troops attacked Height B.

At thirty metres from the target, enemy fire became extremely violent. Thao Nao ordered his men to return the fire, taking advantage of the terrain. He was nimble and fierce as a black panther. Accompanied by a machinegunner, he came to within a dozen yards of the enemy bunker. The gunner fired short and precise

bursts. Then Thao Nao hurled a grenade, and enemy fire stopped dead. It was as if with one blow of a sharp knife he had cut down a banana trunk.

"Forward !" he shouted, his voice ringing. The whole platoon rushed forward like an impetuous stream.

From the top of Sensi hill, enemy machineguns were firing on us. From a little further behind, mortars lobbed their shells. But at the head of his men, Thao Nao continued his advance, with the support of our artillery.

A shell exploded at a short distance: Thao Nao tottered a few steps then fell. I rushed to his side. He was wounded at the shoulder and his jacket was stained with blood. But before I had opened my mouth, he had sprung to his feet and dashed forward, his submachinegun under his arm.

The column under Chum's command had joined Thao Nao's on Height B strewn with corpses and splashed with blood. Enemy survivors were fleeing towards Height C where our artillery already raised clouds of dust.

Thao Nao had lost much blood. He was terribly pale and could hardly stand on his feet. Somebody was whispering something in his ear, perhaps to tell him to take a rest, for I saw him staring hard at his interlocutor and heard his voice:

"In the thick of the battle, you want me to lay down my weapon, don't you ?"

He sounded so angry that I could hardly recognize his voice ! It was also clear that Thao Nao was at the limit of his strength.

Yet he continued to lead his platoon which captured Height C half an hour later. Our first counter-offensive thus came to a complete success.

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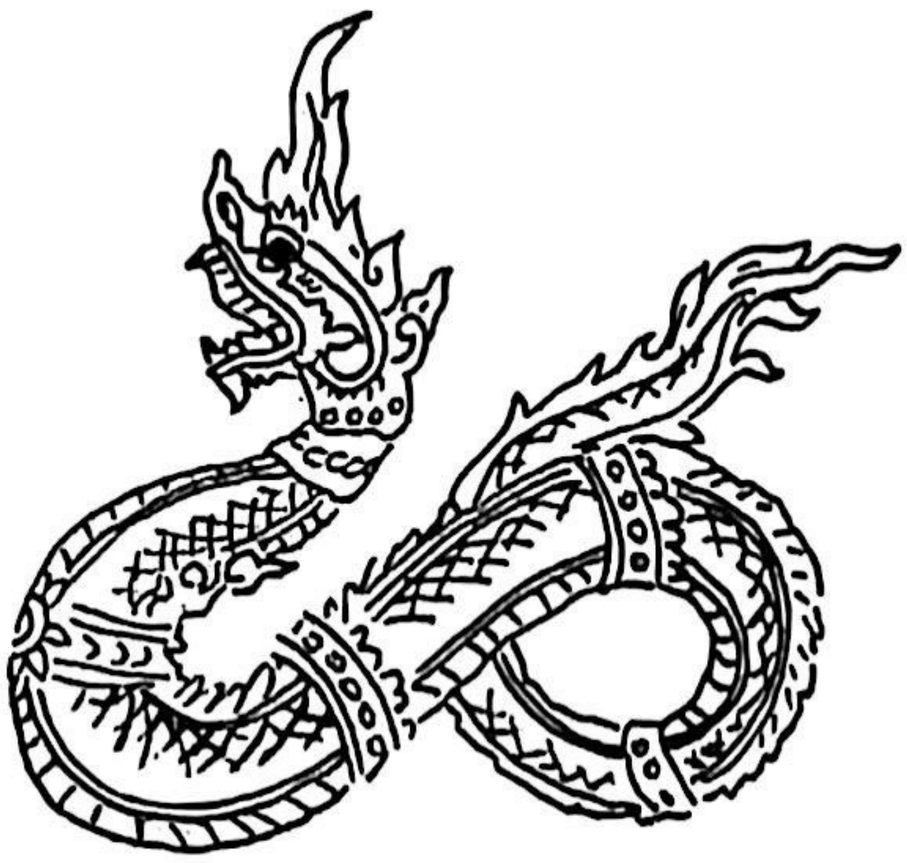
Thao Nao was carried to the military hospital in the rear. As for me, I went with the unit which pursued the Americans and their mercenaries as far as Hinhop bridge. The image of this valiant fighter remained deeply engraved in my mind.

I was so happy to meet him some time later at the Second Congress of Army Heroes and Elite Fighters.



THE GIRL OF THE MOUNTAINS OF LUANGPRABANG

by PA XEUT

THE news of Su's election to the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat spread like wild fire in the mountain areas of Luangprabang. It infused joy into the hearts of the Meo people, men and women, young and old. "Ah, we are so glad!" they said. "Who can say that the Meo people are not capable of waging the revolution? For having followed the Prince *, for having waged the revolution and fought the Americans, our people can now raise their heads."

The most contented must be the people of Phounovan, Su's native village. It was there that she had spent her childhood, with her mother and her younger sister, it was there that she had made the first steps on the road of the revolution, it was there that she had grown mature.

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* Prince Souphanouvong, President of the Neo Lao Haksat (Publ.).

When she was seventeen, she helped her mother grow crops on the family's patch of forest clearing and weave fabrics on the loom. Her father, taken up by revolutionary work, only came home at rare intervals. Mother and daughter not only supported themselves: they managed to put some money aside for the father each time he came home. Better still, they sent rice, maize and even clothing to the partisans as gifts. "They devote themselves to defending the people's interests," Su's mother would say, "the people must help them." Once, having made a jacket and a pair of trousers for her husband, she gave them to the partisans when she saw that they were in need of clothes.

The example set by her father, who devoted himself body and soul to the revolution, and that of her mother, who actively supported it, gave Su much food for thought. Phounovan, like the neighbouring villages : Phoutianom, Phatoup, etc., was the scene of an irresistible revolutionary upsurge. The mercenaries, lackeys of the Americans, who came for plunder were received by the partisans with gunshots. Thus Su gradually became imbued with revolutionary thoughts. The exploits achieved by Lao Kaou had also been a great source of inspiration for her. He was a cadre sent by the Neo Lao Haksat to Phatoup village for prapaganda and agitation work. Speaking of him the old folk nodded their heads : "Yes, he is a true son of the Meo people." For Lao Kaou loved the children and respected the old people. He reminded even everyone of the fierce struggle waged by our forefathers against the French. He organized the youth into partisan units to protect the crops from the wild beasts and defend

the village against the mercenaries. Once, in order to round him up, the reactionaries sent one hundred well-armed men to Phatoup. Lao Kaou took shelter in a grotto, having his rifle with him. Every mercenary trying to force his way into the grotto was immediately shot down. For three days and three nights, without food nor sleep, Lao Kaou held his own against one hundred mercenaries. Then a partisan force came, drove the attackers away and deliver him. He had only three cartridges left.

Su was greatly moved by Lao Kaou's valiant deed. "Our people," she thought, "have many brave men! I will do my utmost to be like Lao Kaou."

So she went and talked to her uncle Nung Gia, the partisans' commander. She told him she wanted to be with the revolution. Her uncle gave her plenty of encouragement, but her mother was rather apprehensive. She thought Su was still too young and wouldn't let her go.

One day, as Su was about to carry some rice and clothing to the partisans reports of guns were heard from the edge of the forest near the village. When she came rushing down the stairs of her house on stils she saw Nung Gia running to her under the rain. "The enemy are coming," he shouted. "Take the village people out by the trail over Mount Chong Ghenh. The partisans will stay and fight."

Su immediatly warned her mother then dashed through the village lanes, sounding the alert. "The enemy are coming," she shouted. "They are very cruel ruffians. Let old people, women, and children evacuate

the village to give our partisans free room to fight. We'll come back as soon as the enemy are driven away, Nung Gia said so !"

Led by Su, about fifty people carrying their children and bags containing their possessions worked their way through thick jungle in the direction of Mount Chong Ghenh. Su tried her best to reassure them, telling them how well hidden to the enemy's sight the trail was. All followed her confidently over the slippery jungle track which sometimes crossed an impetuous, but shallow stream. Arrived at a safe place, Su helped the people settle down, then retraced her steps.

When she arrived near the village, it was almost midnight. It was pitchdark. A drizzle was falling. Drops of rain water trickling down the tree leaves fell on her neck, ran down her back and made her shiver. But she was resolved to find the partisans. Climbing on a tree, she tried to locate them : Nung Gia had told her that the partisans' muskets threw out a big flash at each firing and this helped to locate them at night. In this way, she soon succeeded in rejoining the partisans. Nung Gia needed someone to go to district headquarters to report the situation and ask for some reinforcement. Without taking a rest, Su started out immediately under the rain. This time, she went round Mount Chong Ghenh by the southern trail, which was shorter but much harder to travel. Some stretches were terribly slippery, others were full of sharp-edged stones, or lined with thorny bushes. Many streams had to be crossed and the rain became heavier and heavier.

Nevertheless, Su arrived at destination at dawn, whereas a full day was ordinarily required for the trip.

A relief force was immediately sent to Phounovan, where together with the local partisans they put the enemy to flight.

The villagers' esteem for Su increased greatly after this event. People agreed that she had plenty of sang-froid, showed respect for the old folk, love for the children and concern for everybody's safety and well-being. For her part, she felt that she had grown more mature and that she had rendered a small service to the revolution. But thinking of her parents and Lao Kaou, she said to herself that she still had a long way to go...

As the people felt more confidence in her, Su was trusted with more and more work: liaison, military training, patrol duty... She always carried her assignments through in spite of fatigue and difficulties.

A year later, she was called to Luangprabang for work with the Provincial Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat. At that time, delegations were coming from many localities to ask for weapons and ammunition to equip newly set up partisan units. How could the Committee satisfy all these demands? No delegation would agree to go back empty-handed, and more delegations kept coming. The Committee's president was losing his sleep over this thorny problem. Su came to see him and proposed that he let her talk to the comrades: he was greatly perplexed, for how could this eighteen-year-old lass succeed where he had failed? Finally however, he agreed to let her meet the delegations.

She was immediately plied with questions :

"When shall we get weapons ?"

"What kinds of weapons will you give us ?"

"And how much ammunition ?"

"Without arms to bring back, we can't return and face the people !"

Su kept cool, for she had foreseen all that. When everybody had finished asking questions, she quietly began to talk :

"Dear uncles, dear brothers," she said, "I have listened to you. The Provincial Committee members have also listened to all of you and they understand your feelings. But you know quite well that the Committee is not rich ; how can it provide arms to all localities ? If you stay here and wait, nothing would come out of it. Meanwhile, the enemy won't stay inactive : they will launch raids here and there. Without you home, there will be less strength to oppose them. They will ransack your villages, destroy the crops, torture your parents and friends. They spare neither old folk, women, nor children. In this way won't you be committing a grave fault towards your ancestors and fellow-villagers ?"

The atmosphere was changed. The older people became thoughtful, while the young showed less impatience.

"In Luangprabang, our province," Su continued, "many villages had no weapons at the beginning, but later they succeeded in making them with their own hands. Phatoup for instance drove the enemy away and freed Lao Kaou with muskets of its own making. All told, Phatoup's muskets have so far killed about

eighty enemy troops. Phoutianom's traps have got one hundred of them. In my own village, Phounovan, I have seen similar muskets and traps at work: girls also help in their making. You, who have much more skill, you'll surely succeed in making muskets and traps, too. You'll outstrip Phounovan in that!"

Everybody started asking Su questions on how the Phounovan people had been waging guerilla warfare. She told the audience about the exploits achieved by the people of Phatoup, Phoutianom and Phounovan, who, armed only with rudimentary weapons, had succeeded in repelling all enemy inroads. Faces lighted up and smiles appeared on the lips of many listeners.

Finally, the delegations returned home, their brains full of new ideas.

Since then, Su became a provincial cadre in charge of propaganda and agitation work. She found solution to many a thorny problem born of the surging progress of the revolutionary movement. One aspect of her job consisted in receiving district delegations and listening to their complaints and requests. Her interlocutors were all enthused by her advice, and their revolutionary determination strengthened. Before leaving, they all promised to emulate the people of Phatoup, Phounovan and Phoutianom in manufacturing muskets, setting traps and organizing partisan corps for the defence of their villages.

Su's jobs became ever more numerous. Also more numerous were the trips she made to get in clear touch with youth and women's organizations. Once she went as far as the extreme north of the country for agitation work among the national minorities with a view to

giving a greater impulse to their participation in the patriotic struggle against the American interventionists. She also saw service with the High Command of the Namtha front. That was in early 1962, when the campaign entered its final phase, and the great tactical groups of the rightist faction under U.S. Command were utterly defeated. On the same occasion she undertook political work in the Lao Liberation army.

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Wherever she went, Su performed her work with zeal and enthusiasm, and complete selflessness. Following her election to the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat, she was completely taken up by an enormous amount of work, but her revolutionary fervour only increased, as did the confidence and affection felt by the masses for her.

Her style of work consisted in recalling the glorious history of our people and the feats of real personages that everybody knew and could emulate. She also had a knack for instilling a revolutionary content into folksongs and using them to illustrate what she said to people.

The Meos like to recall her arrival at Hongthou one cold wintry morning, holding in her arms her two-month-old baby. Hongthou was a village bordering the zone under the control of the rightist faction, whose troops often conducted plundering raids. Su's job was to organize the local people's resistance.

She called on the village headman. While she sat by the fire nursing her baby and drying its diapers, the headman visited his fellow-villagers and asked them to come. By fear of enemy reprisals however, very few dared to show up. Su invited them in and talked to them about crop-raising and fabric-weaving, and other familiar topics, without ever mentioning politics. Then she started singing a folk melody, softly at first. Her sweet voice gradually rose. More and more people came and sat around the fire.

When the audience had grown big enough, Su began singing a revolutionary song on an old folk tune. The song depicts the former peaceful life of the Lao people and how it has been disrupted by the imperialists, who sow discord among the nationalities. It tells of the Lao people's sufferings since they fell under the domination of the French colonialists, then of the American interventionists. It praises the Neo Lao Haksat which works for the unity of the nation, the patriotic struggle against the imperialists and the building of a new life in independence, peace and national concord.

Su's silvery voice rose and fell, full of passion and feeling. When she stopped the audience remained spellbound.

"Go on singing, my child," said an old woman.

Again Su's voice rose. She denounced the crimes of the American interventionists and their lackeys and sang the praise of Prince Souphanouvong, the respected leader of the Lao people. Su's voice went straight to the hearts of the people, awakened their national

feeling, deepened their hatred for the enemy, and strengthened their faith in the future of the revolution.

The fire died out in the hearth, but nobody wanted to leave...

Su stayed five days in Hongthou. In the daytime she worked with the people on their patches of burnt-out forest clearing. In the evening, sitting by the fire, she taught them to sing, and in her quiet manner, she awakened their political consciousness, showed them how to organize themselves, how to resist enemy raids and how to counter enemy deceitful propaganda.

Soon after, the village saw the birth of its first branch of the Women's Union. The women urged their husbands, sons and brothers to enlist in the Liberation army or the partisan corps. The entire people set about studying the line and policies of the Neo Lao Haksat. An emulation movement was launched. Agricultural work was given a great impulse...

As for Su, she kept travelling over the roads and mountain tracks of her native region, bringing to the people melodious songs which called on them to unite and struggle, and strengthened their faith and determination.

A 250-KILOMETRE PURSUIT

by BOUN NEUA

OUR company belonged to the 2nd Battalion of the Pathet Lao, which had broken away from enemy encirclement at Vientiane in 1959. In early 1961, most of the men left it to help in the building up of new units. Young recruits who came to replace them were full of zeal, but they were of course only tiros. Many of them were home-sick, or missed their sweethearts, and only thought of getting a furlough. However it was pressing to complete the organization of the unit and the training of the men. Then the company received the order to go and intercept the enemy, who was coming from Salaphoukhoun.

Following their withdrawal from Vientiane, the Pathet Lao and genuine neutralist troops had marched on the Plain of Jars and Xiengkhouang, which they had liberated in January 1961, sowing panic among the American imperialists and their lackeys. The enemy then had assembled all available forces to

reconquer this region, which was of great strategic importance. More than twenty battalions of rebel troops * and a large number of Thai and Saigon support units under the command of U.S. officers were rushed to the attack in a pincer movement. A support column — eight puppet battalions — was coming from Paksane and marching on Thathom, threatening Xiengkhouang from the south. The main column comprising more than twelve battalions was coming from Vientiane and Luangprabang and was to meet the other at Salaphoukhoun, then attack the Plain of Jars from the west. At Xiengkhouang the patriotic forces were still taken up by consolidation and building-up work. With only limited effectives they had to face the enemy on two fronts. The High Command decided to send a small force to Salaphoukhoun to contain the enemy and gain time for organizing the defence.

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Our company was ordered to occupy the ridge of Phousoung and contain the enemy for three days. Some tenderfeet were rather apprehensive, but most of the men were filled with enthusiasm by this tough assignment. "Let them come. They will see what the 2nd Battalion is like," said the veterans. Even among the novices, many were quite eager to have an opportunity to knock down enemy tanks and artillery.

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* Troops of the rightist faction. (Publ.)

Situated about twenty kilometres from Salaphoukhoun, Phousoung was a ridge covered with tiger grass overlooking National Road 7 but less high than the mountains facing it on the side from which the enemy was coming. We spent the first night digging trenches. The enemy turned up the next day at noon. He started immediately pounding our positions with all his guns.

At first we counted the shells: ten, twenty, thirty... But soon this became impossible for the shelling was too intense. The earth was shaken. Dust and smoke came up in thick columns. When a lull came we shouted to each other, but to no avail for our ears were still ringing with the sounds of the explosions. A few young recruits got into a panic and tried to crawl back to the foot of the hill but they were reassured by the cadres. At dusk the enemy stopped the shelling and bivouacked for the night. One of us had been seriously wounded and two others lightly. Those whose morale had been somewhat shaken regained confidence and all started improving their field-works, which had been a big help during the day's shelling.

The shelling resumed the following morning, for about an hour. Then an enemy battalion rushed to the assault. Believing that we had all turned tail, they arrogantly stalked along. When they were only about one hundred metres away, we opened fire. A machine-gun squad meanwhile turned their flank. Mowed down by our sudden and violent fire, they quickly withdrew, taking with them their killed and wounded.

Having won the first round strongly raised our morale. Defences were consolidated with a view to more fighting.

Two, then three days went by. Our mission had been fulfilled. We were congratulated by the Command but received the order to keep containing the enemy.

Food and ammunition supplies came to us by night, together with gifts and letters from the people of Muongsuoi, Phonsavan, Khangkhay and other places.

The enemy intensified his shelling and multiplied his assaults against our positions. We continued to hold ground and foiled the enemy's attempts one after the other. On February 13, assaults were launched from several sides at the same time. Together with a frontal assault, a flanking attack was made from the south by a column which passed through Nanang village, and another one from the north through the village of Senboum. However, the mercenaries were blown up by our mines, fell into spike traps or were shot down by snipers. Laotheung guerillas at Nanang and Meo guerillas at Senboum were equal to their task. On February 22, the two enemy columns withdrew along Road 13 after having lost twenty men. Two of their companies had been disbanded.

Phousoung remained the enemy's main target. Each day some three hundred shells fell on the ridge and scraped off its tiger grass. Living in underground shelters was a heavy strain on our men's nerves. They hugged the bottom of the trenches and galleries every time the roar of diving enemy planes was heard. However our anti-aircraft guns hit back at them, and we also fired on them with our infantry weapons: this greatly raised the morale of our troops. A plane was soon shot down, then another. The men jumped for joy. Some hailed the A.A. gunners, others were inclined to

take all the credit for themselves. Comrades of support units wrote teasing congratulatory messages: "You fellows should leave us something to do: we are just twiddling our thumbs!"

However life in the trenches and shelters was by no means a pleasant one. To make matters even worse, there was no water on the ridge: it had to be brought to us from far away, and there was only enough to sprinkle a few drops on our faces. Washing our clothes was out of the question. There was usually a lull at noon: then we would sun our clothes and try to make away with the vermin. On moonlit nights, young recruits would be homesick. Once a turtle-dove alighted not far from a trench. "How much I would like to be that bird," someone said. "I would fly home and meet my sweetheart and then we would spend long moments holding each other's hands." — "Oh, only that?" someone else teasingly remarked. And then everybody would start telling his mates about his love.

From time to time the political commissar would organize sham "love duets", traditional style, in which two men, playing a lover and his sweetheart, would bandy love verses with each other. It was great fun, especially when the "girl" outwitted her "lover". These singing sessions lasted often quite late in the night, and the Company commander sometimes had to intervene to send the men to sleep.

One day about a dozen young men from Kasi district worked their way through the jungle and came to see us. The youth of the district, they said, had refused to let themselves be pressganged into the puppet army and had organized themselves into partisan units;

however they did not have enough guns. So they came to ask for some. Their request was met and each of them got a gun. Bidding them farewell, we said : "Now that you have got a capital, the point is to get dividends from it !"

Dividends they soon got. On their way back to Kasi, they decided to lay an ambush on Road 13. To make sure it would be a hundred per cent success, they planned to attack an isolated military vehicle. For several days on end, they patiently waited, but no vehicle came. Their food reserves began to run low. Finally a Jeep turned up, probably a liaison car. A volley sent the Jeep veering wildly before running against a roadside embankment : it overturned and the two men on board were killed. The Kasi youth took their weapons and made for home.

At the end of February, the enemy occupied Sensi hill, which was one kilometre away, to our left. The threat on Phousoung was aggravated. The enemy sought to drive us from our positions through night attacks. The first time, we were nearly caught by surprise. The assailants, who crawled up in the dark, were already quite near our lookout when he saw them and gave the alarm. The men, startled out of their sleep, lobbed grenades and fixed bayonets. But the enemy troops' morale was quite poor : a few machine-gun bursts were enough to put them to flight. They left eight dead and we had to bury their bodies the next morning. We also picked up two wounded : they declared themselves to be members of a puppet "suicide squad" and that on the eve of the attack they had

been made drunk. Saigon and Thai "advisers" had followed the assault party to goad them on, but at the first grenade explosions all of them had shown a clean pair of heels.

The following day, then the next, enemy artillery pounded away at us night and day, then assaults were launched with tank support. But we held our own. Then the enemy tried to cut off our food supplies through artillery barrages. We had to live on preserved food. So we felt no small satisfaction when, after several days of this diet, comrades from nearby positions sent us freshly-cooked rice. Later, we were much moved when learning that they had contented themselves with a thin porridge in order to send us a supply of fresh rice.

Our men's health condition began to get bad. The cadres spared no effort to give them care and comfort. The Company commander and platoon leaders shared their men's life, and performed guard duty in the place of the sick. This greatly enhanced the soldiers' morale.

However, the enemy, stopped dead before Phousoung for one month already, found himself in much poorer physical condition. His morale, which had never been high, was sagging. The puppet soldiers deserted by the dozen, taking with them their weapons and many joined partisan units. The rainy season was drawing near and the mercenaries' anguish increased. All their attacks had ended with heavy losses for them. And with the rainy season coming fast, they could not remain where they were without facing catastrophic prospects of hunger and diseases.

Now we began launching counter-offensives, starting with the capture of some enemy outposts. On March 5, Phakeng was overrun. On the night of the 6th, we attacked Sensi. After a month of defensive fighting, our men were elated to pass to the offensive. Kham Nao's platoon captured two lookout posts in a record time. Panic-stricken, the enemy withdrew ; one counter-attack was quickly foiled. That same night, Phoukham was carried. From Sensi to Phoukham, enemy troops withdrew in disorder towards the cross-roads of Salaphoukhoun, with our troops on their heels.

Something unexpected then happened. Fleeing enemy troops put forth this piece of "news" : "The Pathet Lao is launching a big offensive!" which spread like wild fire and sowed panic into the eight enemy battalions holding Salaphoukhoun. A whole unit of troops took to their heels, followed soon by another. Then it was rumoured that a full-scale withdrawal had been ordered, and this triggered off a general flight. American "advisers" and Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, the Commander-in-Chief of the puppet forces on the Salaphoukhoun front, had to stop their revel and come to encourage their troops. But no one paid any attention to what they said. Many of the troops threatened to open fire on anyone trying to interfere with their flight. Advisers and Commander-in-Chief hastened to board a helicopter and made for Kieoucatiam in the direction of Luangprabang. From there they started sending messages to battalions fleeing towards Vientiane. But those were no longer organized units and nobody was there to monitor the

messages. Furthermore, all radio sets and other baggage had been jettisoned by the panic-stricken troops.

Our company had the honour of being the first on the heels of the enemy. We were quite glad to stretch our legs, which had been benumbed by a month's stay in trenches. We passed Salaphoukhoun, strewn with deserted hutments, ammunition heaps and other equipment. Later we learned that the enemy in his hasty flight had left behind over two thousand 105-mm. howitzer shells and thousands of big-caliber mortar shells. These munitions, which had been destined for us, were now to be fired at their former owners.

Along the road we found numerous vehicles, some half-destroyed by mines, others overturned and lying in the fields lining the roadside. Puppet stragglers were overtaken : as soon as they saw us, they put their hands up and brandished leaflets which we had had circulated in their ranks. We stripped them of their weapons and detailed people to guard them. But soon their number increased to such an extent that we found it simpler to install assembling posts at some villages, to which they were directed.

Only on the night of the second day did we meet some kind of resistance from about a hundred men positioned on a hill-top. Platoon leader Phan decided to attack at once. Under cover of darkness, our men climbed up the slope and hurled grenades on the enemy. Ten were killed or wounded. The rest, about forty-five men, surrendered and asked to join us.

On March 11, the enemy fled from Kasi. We again met the district partisans to whom we had given arms.

They had by now grown into a full platoon. They told us about the feats they had accomplished since we parted: the weapons they had captured from the enemy were enough to equip an entire company. Besides, the enemy had left behind in Kasi an important ammunition dump. When they learnt about the enemy's withdrawal, the Kasi partisans had said to themselves: "Three categories of people will pass along this road; we shall have three categories of gifts ready for them. Thai and Saigon officers are wont to ride in cars; so we'll regale them with... mines, grenades and bullets. As for the puppet troops, who trudge along on foot, we shall distribute leaflets to them; or from the hill-tops we shall call on them with our megaphones to cross over to our side. The third category is you, friends. For you, here are our gifts." Smiling young girls brought platefuls of savoury glutinous rice, cakes, eggs, etc. We ate some and resumed our pursuit of the enemy. One of the young men in our unit found time and opportunity to ask a graceful girl her name and that of her village. When starting out on the road, he told her with a smile, "We shall surely see each other again, when the war is over."

On the way to Phanom, we overtook forty officers and noncoms of the puppet troops. The tyres of their cars had been punctured by our snipers' bullets. As they were wont to move about on cars, they could not keep pace on foot with their fleeing troops. So they asked to surrender. They told us they were instructors in a military school, but that the Americans and their lackeys were so short of officers they had ordered them

to go to the front. An officer told us that General Bounleuth Sanichan, Commander-in-Chief of the puppet troops, nicknamed the "Skedaddler" because following his defeat at Namtha he had fled at the head of his soldiers as far as Thailand, and had ordered his men to stop and set up defences at about fifteen kilometres from Salaphoukhoun. This distance was later extended to twenty-five kilometres. But his men never stopped. This was only natural since as we have seen, Bounleuth's orders never went beyond Kieoucatiam, where Kouprasit was, and never reached the fleeing troops. So the Yanks and their lackeys were forced to have Phanom occupied by one infantry battalion and four 105-mm. howitzers to bar the way to... their own soldiers, and halt their flight. But the survivors none the less continued their retreat past Phanom and as far as Vangvieng. As for the men who were supposed to occupy Phanom, they got panic-stricken and turned tail when our first shells exploded among them.

However, after twelve days of pursuit, we were no more than about a hundred men, all dead tired. Besides, the American imperialists and their lackeys, in spite of their pitiful failures, did not resign themselves to defeat. They mustered 3,500 men at Vangvieng and sent them against Phanom. We retreated four kilometres from Phanom and set up defences, waiting for the bulk of our force to join us. As our various units were fighting in scattered localities, we were to hold our positions for more than a month.

Meanwhile, news of more victories came. On March 29, 1961, Bourivan, Commander of the rightist faction's troops at Thadeua south of Vientiane, rebelled against

his superiors and crossed over to the partisans with three lorries loaded with arms and ammunition. Thousands of bonzes, students and functionaries were leaving Vientiane for the liberated zone. In Luang-prabang, the capital, and Savannakhet, leaflets appeared, calling on the people to resist the American-Thai aggressors and their henchmen. On March 31, the enemy, under heavy pressure, evacuated Thathom and Thavieng. All the region south of Xiengkhouang was liberated. We were all the more burning with impatience.

On April 5, U.S. helicopters landed a company of puppet troops at Banhom, twenty kilometres north of Kasi. This was followed by the parachuting of two more companies into Kasi itself. Our road was thus cut off at both ends. We received the order to annihilate the enemy troops at Kasi, while waging a diversion action at Phanom. Together with another unit and local partisans, we worked out a plan of operations. It was simple and relied mainly on our men's courage and the surprise factor. On the night of the 7th, we moved to a place near Kasi. Two columns moved secretly up to the enemy positions and attacked them after lobbing grenades. The enemy was caught napping. He fought back half-heartedly for a while, then fled in the direction of Banhom, with our men on their heels. At some distance from Banhom, they left the main road, jettisoned their heavy equipment and headed for Kieoucatiam through jungle tracks. They had probably learned by then that the company parachuted into Banhom had been beaten hollow by our troops.

It was with great joy that the Kasi population welcomed us into the place. The people there had always given active support to the revolution. Formerly, when the region was under the occupation of the Americans and their mercenaries, they had held only a few points along the road. The rest of the region belonged to the guerillas. On top of a hill, the mercenaries had built a military post. One day, the post commander assembled the local population and said to them in a threatening voice : "Look how powerful the fortress of the mandarins is ! Those Pathet Lao barbarians will tremble with fear just looking at it ! It would be better for you to remain loyal to the Government, hear ?" The Yanks who were present guffawed with satisfaction. The traitors and their American masters tried to force the population to bring them tributes of rice, meat, young men and young girls. But the people refused to comply, in spite of terror raids. When the fleeing troops from Salaphoukhoun passed by the post, its commander was seized with panic and thought only of packing up bag and baggage. The old folk then told him in a honeyed tone : "We shall deeply regret your departure, Sir Mandarin. Those Pathet Lao barbarians won't be long to come. They will look at your fortress and turn yellow with fear : you'd better stay and watch them !"

In villages along the road, the people accorded us a moving welcome. It was like near relatives seeing each other again after a long separation. Our supply service having asked the district population for one hundred tons of rice, one hundred and twenty tons

were brought to us after only three days. We had meat for our meals every day. Within a month, we were given twenty-one buffaloes and five hundred pigs. The old folk told us : "Without you, my sons, the enemy would have robbed us of everything. Eat your fill, build up your strength so as to annihilate all those pirates !" They also gave us large quantities of vegetables.

For a month, we stood fast at Phanom while preparing to attack the enemy. There was an urgent need of cannon and big-caliber mortar shells. For want of lorries, these munitions came to us on porters' backs. Each of those voluntary workers could carry only one shell, but there were so many of them that there was plenty of ammunition for our guns. The local people also sent us rice cakes, eggs, etc. As we knew that the enemy had plundered the region we tried to refuse these gifts. But to no avail. Our generous suppliers even grew angry at us !

Enemy aircraft machinegunned and bombed the roads. Old people and children took refuge in the forests. Young men enrolled in partisans' or voluntary porters' units. The women busied themselves with cooking the combatants' meals and taking care of the children. Forty-two women of Ch. village looked after the feeding and lodging of four to five hundred troops, guerillas, voluntary porters, civilian cadres, refugees, war prisoners and enemy troops who had crossed over to our side. All received adequate food and shelter.

Once, an anti-aircraft unit took up position not far from the place, but nobody thought of bringing it supplies. Only when hearing the crash of its guns firing at intruding enemy aircraft did Nangkham, the

head of the women's supply team, remember the presence of the gunners. She hastily ran to the mountains, where the gunners were, carrying on her back her basket full of supplies. That evening, at the group's meeting, she made her self-criticism: "Thanks to our troops, we have been freed of oppression and humiliation. Yet, they lead a hard life in combat trenches. Our duty is to look after them as best we could."

On another occasion, two young recruits who had deserted came to the village and made love to young girls. Informed of what happened, Nangkham called a meeting of the village women and invited the two young men to attend. Then she told them: "Here in the rear, we feel much admiration for the selfless patriotism you soldiers evince at the front. Please accept the gift of two handkerchiefs as souvenirs and transmit to your fellow-combatants at the front our best wishes for prompt victory over the enemy."

The following day, at dawn, the two lads made their way back to their unit. What happened to them was a good lesson for all.

While making preparations for an attack on Phanom-Vangvieng, we asked the local people to provide 120 more tons of rice. "Don't worry," they said, "you'll get them. Provided you give us protection for bringing in the coming harvest." Our compatriots were as good as their word. As for us, we kept our promise too. Never had the Kasi people brought in such a bumper harvest and in such favourable conditions.

From the districts of Vangvieng, Tourakhom, Phonhong, delegates of the population made their way

up hill and down dale, sneaking past enemy posts, to come and see us with gifts and letters. As during the resistance against the French colonialists, the people of Vientiane province always show great patriotism and an indomitable spirit. (In mid-1964, in defiance of all conventions, the American imperialists and the rightist reactionaries launched Operation "Three Arrows". A number of villages along Road 13 and belonging to Kasi, Vangvieng and Tourakhom districts fell back under enemy occupation. Again their people were plunged into humiliation and suffering. But they kept their staunch spirit and their deep hatred of the aggressors and their lackeys, who were soon to be annihilated).

On April 22, after receiving reinforcements, we began our attack on Phanom defended by two enemy battalions. The place was dominated by two rocky ridges and the road was defended by two hills. Enemy field works had been ready since long, whereas our own trenches were rather shallow because of the hard rocky soil. Our first assault brought no result. So did the two following ones. A number of our men were killed or wounded. Some already thought of retreating. This provoked the anger of Thao Loi, the commander of the spearhead group : "What, retreat ? Our compatriots look forward to our victory, which would bring back a peaceful life to them, and you're talking of retreating ?" he said in a furious voice. He resumed the assault, creeping forward on his belly, taking advantage of the irregularities of the terrain. The entire unit followed him. Meanwhile another column,

which was carrying out a flanking manœuvre, succeeded in getting quite close to the enemy's artillery positions and Headquarters. The enemy got into a panic, and soon a stampede ensued. Thao Loi and his men dashed forward and captured one of the hills. Enemy casualties amounted to one hundred killed and wounded, and another hundred captured, among them an American "adviser". The latter had feigned death, but our men had not been taken in and had extracted him from a heap of corpses. Pale with fear, he was now trying to implore mercy. How funny it was to see a lanky Yank kowtow to a little soldier of the Pathet Lao.

Enemy survivors were fleeing towards Vangvieng after abandoning all their heavy equipment. We started out immediately on their pursuit. At a distance of a few kilometres from Vangvieng, we were stopped by a violent barrage. So we waited for our own artillery. But all of a sudden, we saw the enemy troops abandoning their positions and scampering into the jungle. We dashed forward : not a soul in their trenches. At Vangvieng we learned that a unit of our troops had outflanked the enemy and so had forced him to retreat. For the second time, Kouprasith left his men to their fate : boarding a helicopter in company with his American advisers, the Commander-in-Chief only thought of saving his own hide !

The pursuit was resumed. The puppets were protected by USAF aircraft : T. 6s and F. 86s. The roar of their engines filled the sky but their machinegunning was rather half-hearted, for they could not distinguish

their own troops from ours. At night, dog tired and relying on air cover, the mercenaries slept on the roadside itself. Their 6th company, which brought up the rear, was to stand guard. Stand guard it did, but in a rather curious fashion! It withdrew to a hilltop three hundred metres from the road and spent the night there. Thus that night we unexpectedly ran into the bulk of the fleeing enemy troops. A sleepy sentry woke up with a start and asked, yawning: "Who are you?" The leader of our vanguard platoon answered quietly: "Ninth infantry battalion. We lost our way." "All right," said the sentry, "try to find a good place and get a good sleep. To-morrow we'll decamp at dawn. Don't worry about security: the 6th company is standing guard behind."

Feigning to look for some place to take up quarters for the night, we wove our way through rows of sleeping soldiers, getting into good combat positions. When everything was ready, a hail of grenades was hurled on the officers' tents and after firing a few bursts of machinegun, we called on the enemy to surrender. All at once, we heard cries from every side: "We surrender. Don't shoot!" It was an undescribable turmoil. Some of the troops got away, but most let themselves be captured. In all, we took prisoner over one hundred.

Kouprasit was dismissed and replaced by Siho Lanphoutakoun as Commander of the front along Road 13. The first action taken by the new commander was to muster two battalions, which he sent by helicopter to Vangkhi to cover the retreat, which continued.

We were nearing Vangkhi when Radio Pathet Lao on April 24 broadcast the news that the two Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference had called for a cease-fire but that the rightist reactionaries, on instructions from their American masters, had demanded that the legal government and the Neo Lao Haksat come and discuss with them at Luangprabang. To show our good will, we stopped our pursuit. The enemy immediately availed himself of this opportunity to try and regain lost ground. From Vangkhi, a battalion-size counter-attack was launched with the support of four tanks. This treachery greatly angered our men. Our guns put out of action one tank and damaged two others. Then we counter-attacked and put the enemy to flight. A Yank was captured. He had tried to run away on a Jeep, but as his car was passing a column of fleeing soldiers, they shot at it, killing the driver. The car veered and bumped against a road embankment, and the Yank was knocked unconscious.

Thus ended the offensive launched by the Americans and their lackeys with a view to recapturing the Plain of Jars. They had suffered heavy losses : two thousand killed, wounded, captured, or having crossed over to our side. Defeated on all fronts, the enemy had been driven away from the vast regions of Mahaxay-Nhommarat (April 15), Muongsai-Namo (April 25), Muonghun-Pacbeng (April 26), Tchepone-Muongphin (May 2). With the provinces of Xiengkhouang and Samneua, and the major part of Lower Laos, the liberated zone now spread in one stretch over three-fifths of the national territory, from north to south.

The guerillas were active everywhere. The Western press itself had to recognize that the Pathet Lao controlled important stretches of road in the very neighbourhood of important centres. The people's political struggle experienced an irresistible upsurge. High-ranking mandarins and puppet officials felt so insecure about the future that they began sending their families and money to Thailand. They probably reckoned that as things were going, the Pathet Lao troops would soon reach the banks of the Mekong river.

I PAID A VISIT TO THE PEOPLE OF NAKHE

by THAO BOUN LIN

NAKHE is situated in an area bordering the region controlled by the rightist faction. Before last year's rainy season, the Americans and their lackeys had launched raids there and set up a post garrisoned by a platoon of mercenaries with a view to gradually encroaching on the free zone.

The enemy started a frantic propaganda campaign made up of lies and slander against the Neo Lao Haksat. Then he resorted to corruption. Finally it was violence and intimidation. The people were forced by the mercenaries to take up arms against the revolutionary forces. Twenty-one militiamen were recruited from among the villagers. When the dry season came, the garrison prepared to leave the post. A send-off was organized, in the course of which the militiamen swore loyalty to the puppet authorities of the rightist faction. One by one, they rose, fired a shot in the air and swore to shoot down any Pathet who dared to come to Nakhe. All this was reported to me by a

villager who later left Nakhe for the free zone. He also said that the militiamen added, however: "I'll shoot down any Pathet, except Thoong Dam, for he possesses a talisman which protects him from bullets."

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Thus, my reputation as a death-dodger, which I had acquired two years ago in the eyes of the local people, had remained intact. Yet, it was now more difficult for me to go to Nakhe. There was a solid stockade around the village and night patrols were conducted at night by the militia. Pathet militants now found it much harder to contact the population, who were afraid of reprisals.

I decided to go to Nakhe on the occasion of the anniversary of the Birth of Buddha, which fell this year on April 15. Dressed in my best clothes, I started out on the road in company with some young people of Poung, a village in the free zone, who were going to Nakhe to participate in the festivities held there. By four in the afternoon, we reached destination. Leaving my companions, I stepped right into the main hall of the pagoda and asked to speak to the Bonze Superior. About fifty bonzes, clad in saffron robes, were present. As soon as they learned that I was a member of the Neo Lao Haksat, they gave me a cordial welcome.

The bonzes agreed to let me assemble the population for a meeting. They even promised to assure my safety. Gongs and tom-toms were sounded. The people slowly headed for the pagoda.

Together with the Bonze superior, I stepped forward. Like a soldier once the fight has begun, I felt extraordinarily calm. Before me were the people: I felt confidence in them. The twenty-one militiamen gave me no fear : I was among my people.

"Pathet !"

It was the militiamen shouting. They pointed their guns at me, and cocked them. There were eddies among the crowd. But no shot was fired yet. The old bonze and two others stepped forward, called for order and asked the militiamen to lower their weapons.

"Let everyone stay where he is !" I shouted.

The atmosphere was quite tense. With a ferocious air, the militiamen offered to pounce upon me, but they were held back by the people around them.

"I am the invulnerable Thoong Dam," I said calmly. "You, militiamen, I know you well. You are Poong, you Chanti, and you Khamta... Don't kick up such a shindy. You're twenty-one in number. But even if you were fifty, you wouldn't be able to do me any harm. Remember : he who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind."

Silence prevailed gradually. The militiamen showed less aggressiveness. The bonzes regained their places. I kept on addressing the crowd, denouncing the crimes of the American aggressors and their valets. I cited plenty of evidence in support of my indictment.

"He is right !"

"That's exactly what's happened !"

The Lao people love peace, respect justice, hate treachery and perfidy. That's what made them listen sympathetically to my words.

"Thoong Dam is right!"

"Let him go on speaking!"

I expounded the line of the Neo Lao Haksat, which struggled for peace, neutrality, independence, national reunification, democracy and prosperity. Many people loudly expressed their approval.

"We're glad to hear Thoong Dam speak!"

"The Neo Lao Haksat is good, the Americans and their henchmen bad!"

After the meeting, the bonze agreed to let me have a private interview with the militiamen behind the pagoda, at the foot of newly-built towers. The militiamen were already half-seas over and had blood-shot eyes. Yet that very tipsiness seemed to incite them to speak their minds more frankly. With a few exceptions they were all sprung from the toiling peasantry. I knew they had been enrolled in the militia by force or trickery. I looked them in the face. Some, who knew me, avoided my gaze.

"Just think the matter over, friends," I said. "This land is ours. Laos is our fatherland. What have the Yanks got to do here? What are they here for, if not turning Laos into an American colony? Perhaps they don't act exactly the same way the French did, but their purposes are the same."

Then I explained to them what neo-colonialism was. I didn't lack evidence to expose the crimes of the Americans. Finally I asked them to give their opinion

frankly. One wanted to speak : a strongly-built fellow with bushy eyebrows. I had seen him around on several occasions and knew his name.

"Go ahead, Poong," I said.

That I should know his name astounded him and caused him to lose countenance. He wiped the sweat on his brows.

"We've got accounts to square with the Pathet Lao," he finally said in a rather embarrassed voice. "They killed one of our men, Phoxi."

I told him that Phoxi had committed many crimes, that he had acted as a spy for the enemy, that more than once he had helped them catch and massacre Neo Lao Haksat militants, and that, besides, he had been caught red-handed when participating in a raid.

"Why did you mangle his face?" Poong asked.

"But it was the Americans and their lackeys who did that! They want to sow discord and hatred among the Lao people. They give you guns and incite you to shoot at us. Were it not for their lies, brothers, you would be on the side of the Revolution!"

Another militiaman, quite young, wearing a red beret and paratroop boots, said rather aggressively :

"I for one won't serve the Pathet!"

The others stared at him.

"Xoun Thoung," I said in a severe voice, "I know you are the son of Xiphoung, the canton chief. You are still too young to understand. You are free to follow us or to refuse to do so. But if you let yourself be misled by your father and do us harm, you'll regret it. And it won't be our fault."

Then, turning to the others, I continued :

"We are perfectly aware of the Yanks' perfidy and cruelty. We always look upon the Nakhe people as our brothers. If some of you have shot at us, it is because they have been misled by the enemy. Today I've come to you as a son of Nakhe, as your brother, to show you who are your friends and who your foes.

The atmosphere had become relaxed and confident. Many villagers had come near our group. Suddenly one of them asked :

"Is it true, Thoong Dam, that you are invulnerable to bullets ?"

This question aroused strong interest, for a legend had grown on my subject. I felt rather amused.

"Yes, I am," I said.

"Aha," said some people with satisfaction, "there you see !"

I puffed at my pipe for a minute or two, then said :

"No, brothers and sisters, I was only joking. I am, like everybody else, made up of flesh and blood."

I took out of my pocket a penknife and under the astonished gaze of the crowd slightly pricked the palm of my hand. A tiny drop of blood oozed out.

"You see, I am not invulnerable," I said. "This penknife is enough of a weapon to put an end to my life."

Poong's neighbour cocked his gun and aimed it at me.

"Is this bastard going to shoot ?" I asked myself. "Is he going to kill me ?"

Facing me, Xoun Thoung was fidgeting, but I remained calmly seated.

"Order !" I merely said.

Before I had time to say anything more, the man's gun crashed. However, Poong, his neighbour, had raised the barrel and the bullet whizzed past above my head. Heavy silence fell. Then something unexpected happened : the man who had shot threw his gun on the ground and knelt down before me.

"Thoong Dam," he pleaded, "I only wanted to test your courage. You are a truly brave man. I surrender."

Everybody heaved a sigh of relief.

"Good !"

"Thoung has given himself up to Thoong Dam !"

Availing myself of the favourable situation, I continued my explanations :

"Friends, I have neither talisman nor magic formula. If people have believed me to be invulnerable, it was because I had escaped unharmed from several enemy encirclements. But the reason for this was simply the cowardice of the mercenaries .They were so shaking with fear that they missed every shot ! My grenades did the rest. My guardian angel is the just cause I serve and the affection bestowed upon me by the people. Thus, Thoung's bullet could have killed me but did not because of your protection, because you know that I am fighting to defend your interests."

I added after a short pause, "Now, I hope, no one among you still thinks of killing me."

Smiles lit up faces. Then I heard someone calling from a distance, "Poong ! Poong !" A young girl came

running. "The soldiers at the post are coming for the feast," she puffed out. "They all have guns."

The news set the crowd astir. People bustled about, seeking to protect me. I motioned to them to stay calm. Then I took my leave of them, promising to return and wishing them good health and good luck.

Poong, looking as if he was thinking very hard, shouted :

"Enjoy the festivities. But let no one say a word of our meeting. Chau Tha and Thoung, take your weapons and follow me !"

Then Poong and his two fellow-militiamen accompanied me as far as the edge of the forest.

WE CAN DEFEAT THEM

by THAO BOUN LIN

THE Americans and their valets were concentrating troops to mop up Laongam, a guerilla base. Someone asked Thao Toun :

"What are we going to do ? We have but a few old muskets. They are armed to the teeth. Besides, they are under the command of American officers !"

Thao Toun remembered that an official of the puppet administration had asked him practically the same question. But it contained a veiled threat which had put him beside himself with anger. So he had snapped back :

"A Pathet Lao fighter has no fear of the Yanks. If you are afraid of them, burrow like a rabbit. Or kowtow to them and take service with them as a watchdog !"

But this time, his interlocutor was of good faith. So Thao Toun told him softly :

"We can defeat them. We know the terrain perfectly. We know where are the hills, the valleys, the swamps, the tracks in the jungle, the shallow places where our

streams may be forded, etc. We have but few guns but we can make crossbows, we can dig spiked pits where the enemy will fall like the wild boars that come to ravage our crops, we can lay snares where he will be caught like hungry tigers. The people love us. They will help us and fight alongside us. We shall win."

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Thao Toun was fifteen when the resistance started against the French colonialists. They oppressed the people, robbed them of their rice, buffaloes, poultry. They pressganged "coolies" and troops. Taxes were imposed on huts built in rays * and even on women's breasts according to their size. People worked like slaves all the year round without earning enough to pay even their taxes. In spite of his youth, Thao Toun was revolted.

One day he said to himself: "I must follow the example of my elder brothers and sisters, who all work for the Revolution. If I cannot yet handle a gun, there is a lot of other things I can do!" Later, he served the Itsala Front as a liaison agent.

Once, probably informed by spies, the mercenaries stationed in a neighbouring post came and encircled his village. They arrested Thao Toun, Thao May (a guerilla) and a cadre, and put them to torture.

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* Burnt-out clearings.

"Where are the cadres?" roared the mercenaries. "Who supply them with food?"

It was Thao Toun who had warned the cadres of the enemy's raid. It was he who had fed them. But he and the other two said nothing. The mercenaries rained blows on them, struck them with rifle-butts, kicked them with their hobnailed boots. They refused to open their mouths. Finally, they were taken to the post.

On the way the cadre managed to escape, but his companions' joy was short-lived. At Noongxenglao hamlet, Thao May was shot, in the presence of Thao Toun. The mercenaries thought they could thus terrify the young boy and make him speak. But Thao Toun kept a stony silence. "They can kill me," he thought to himself, "but as long as there are cadres, the Revolution will go on. The traitors will one day pay for their crimes."

The people of Noongxenglao knew that Thao Toun was a liaison agent of the Itsala. It wrung their hearts to see him in fetters, with blood trickling from his face. They crowded around the mercenaries and plied them with questions:

"Why did you arrest him? What did he do?"

"Are you going to kill this young boy?"

The mercenaries said: "He is an Itsala, a Communist." But the people retorted:

"He is too young. What does he know about politics?"

"He has never gone out of his hamlet. Can he know what communism is ?"

"There are plenty of people like him around here. You don't need to go as far as Namon to arrest one."

The mercenaries were invited in a house and treated to alcoholic drinks. Bits of thread were tied to their wrists, to "bring them luck" according to tradition. They were so placated that they finally released Thao Toun.

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In the period following the 1954 Geneva Conference, the Americans brutally interfered in the country's internal affairs and urged their valets to wreck the accords. One of Thao Toun's elder brothers went to the regrouping zone of the Pathet Lao ; the other took to the bush in anticipation of reprisals. Thao Toun stayed home at the village to look after their old mother. But could a young man content himself with looking after his old mother, and doing nothing for the Revolution ?

Thao Toun wrote petitions protesting against repression, reprisals, and pressganging, demanding rice supplies to the population, help to the needy and the setting up of a national union government. He collected signatures for those petitions.

At the instigation of the Americans, the reactionaries resorted to all kinds of manoeuvres to try and beat the Neo Lao Haksat at the by-election to the

National Assembly : demagogy, corruption, repression... With the cadres' advice, Thao Toun canvassed the region in defiance cf the police, to denounce the American intrigues and urge the population to vote for the Neo Lao Haksat. "One cannot let the Americans and their lackeys deceive the people, " he said to himself. "One must defeat them at the election."

He could not sleep for joy the day he learned the results of the election : The Neo Lao Haksat got nine out of the twenty-one seats contested.

Some time later, the reactionaries, at the instigation of their American masters, arrested the leaders of the Neo Lao Haksat and had the two Pathet Lao battalions encircled with the aim of annihilating them. The Lao people resumed their armed struggle. Answering the appeal of the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat, Thao Toun, like large numbers of young men in the region, enlisted in a provincial army unit.

He fought bravely. His comrades and the local people still remember many episodes in the battles in which he took part. In November 1959, at Bounkhoua, his patrol fell into an ambush. Several men were wounded. Firing his rifle and hurling grenades, he succeeded in stopping the enemy long enough to allow his comrades to beat an orderly retreat, taking with them all their wounded. At Houinamsen in February 1960, at the head of a handful of men, he captured a height and repelled four enemy assaults. At Boongxay, he sneaked up to the enemy lookout post and single-handedly captured the guard. Many other feats were reported to his credit at the battles of Kengcooc, Noongsin, Thateng, etc.

But what people admired most in him was his skill in encouraging, helping and guiding the people to foil enemy mopping-up operations.

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In November 1961, Thao Toun received the order to take a platoon to Laongam to frustrate an enemy raid.

He divided his unit into several squads, one of which he put under his direct command, to go and help the population get ready to face the enemy.

Pits were dug everywhere and spikes planted at their bottom. Traps of all kinds were set. Mines were laid wherever they were supposed to serve their purposes best. Snipers were posted at key points. Guerillas armed with crossbows and muskets roamed the forest, ready to jump on the enemy at favourable moments.

Thao Toun came to see a group of villagers who were planting spikes at the bottom of pits they had dug. An old man, nimble like a youngster, asked him, pointing his finger at a tuft of grass: "Do you see anything?"

"No," Thao Toun said, shaking his head.

"Well," said the old man with a contented smile, "if you can't see a pit there, the Americans surely won't. I've dug twenty-five such pits."

"It's not enough," said Thao Toun. "Dig some more: there are many, many enemy troops coming."

"I certainly will. I'll lay other snares, too. Come to see me with your comrades after the battle. I've got a jar of alcohol which I have buried in the earth for two years already, to give it more flavour."

Thao Toun continued his inspection. Here, he did some repair to the detonating-device of a mine ; there, he improved a trap... Then, at the head of his group, he went and took up position, ready to face the enemy, who was approaching.

The mercenaries, having plentiful supplies of American ammunition, fired their guns at every step. They dared to advance only after wasting heaps of shells and cartridges. Which way they were about to go, everybody knew ! Now, they were coming near : about a company, marching along the road.

The guerillas took aim. But Thao Toun signalled them to wait. At last, the mercenaries passed the turn of the road : a sharp command from Thao Toun, and volley after volley was fired... Two mercenaries fell dead on the spot. The rest scattered along the roadside and tried to seek refuge behind trees or mounds of earth. But there, spiked pits were waiting for them. Many fell into those deadly traps and their howls of pain struck terror into their fellow-mercenaries.

Now, the whole column dared neither to advance nor to retreat. The soldiers lay flat on their bellies and fired at random. At long last, they stopped firing and tried to rescue those who had fallen into the spiked pits. The sight of those pitiful wretches, their flanks, bellies, chests pierced by the bamboo spikes, filled their comrades with terror.

However, their captain, wary like a monkey rummaging in a *ray* for food, slowly advanced step by step, his eyes looking right and left. Everything was now silent. Before him, the road leading to the hamlet lay flat and straight like a ribbon. On both sides of it, nothing but the jungle. Yet, the captain hesitated for a long time. Finally he ordered his troops to fire a few mortar shells then to beat a retreat.

When the mercenaries got to a *ray* left fallow, with a fence and a gate, the captain ordered his troops to stop. A local traitor, who worked for him as an informer, advised him to take his troops across the *ray*, to avoid the beaten paths. As a precautionary measure, a soldier was dispatched as a scout to reconnoiter the terrain. After cautiously examining everything, he climbed on the gate for a general view : all of a sudden, two sharp bamboo spears, which had stood like two stakes at the fence, were hurled at him as if by some mysterious springs. The soldier howled with pain and fell with a crash on the ground. The men were terrified. The column went on in another direction.

Thao Toun and his snipers were lying in wait on top of a hill-slope. This time he intended to get the captain himself. However, when the column was approaching from the direction he had foreseen, Thao Toun had second thoughts. He lowered his rifle and ordered his troops not to shoot. His men were bewildered. Thao Toun said :

"They will cross the ford. We'll wait for them there."

"Let's get them now," his comrades pleaded.

"No," said Thao Toun, "we'll get more of them at the ford." Then he continued in a calm voice:

"We must act the way good hunters do: they know where and when to wait for game, and how to get the greatest number of them."

Everything happened the way Thao Toun had predicted. The informer took the column to the ford. Three soldiers crossed the stream, then waited on the other bank, their fingers on the triggers of their guns, ready to give cover to the column. In single file, the mercenaries now began the crossing. Some had reached the other bank when all of a sudden a raking fire mowed them down. All hastened to retrace their steps, but gunfire came from behind too. Those who still remained on the bank tried to seek cover but were afraid of falling into spiked pits. The captain was completely bewildered. Then the gunfire ceased and two big explosions were heard: mines placed inside the trunks of two big trees on the bank of the stream had exploded. Those standing near were killed on the spot. The trees fell with a tremendous crash, crushing the soldiers under their heavy boughs. The guerillas again opened fire: the mercenaries had had more than enough; they fled in disorder, abandoning their dead and wounded.

Liaison agents came and informed Thao Toun that other enemy detachments had also been intercepted and badly mauled. On our side, a few houses had been burnt down, but no damage had been done to the food reserves and cattle, which had been evacuated into the jungle in good time.

"We'll help the people rebuild their houses," said Thao Toun. "There is plenty of wood and bamboo in the forest. The raid had been a complete failure for the Ameploans and their valets." Then he continued, his eyes shining:

"We must not allow them to beat an orderly retreat. Let's pursue them to their dens."

Since that memorable day, the people of Laongam have kept in their minds those words of Thao Toun which had galvanized them: "We can defeat them." His name has also remained engraved in their hearts.

THE JOYS AND SORROWS OF A YOUNG LAO GIRL

by THOONG VAN VICHIT

WHEN I reached the hut — deserted at this time of day — which served us as a dormitory, I let myself fall on a bamboo bed. The tears which I had managed to contain welled up in my eyes, and I broke into sobs.

So my dearest dreams were not to come true: I was to stay here, whereas my class-mates had received assignments which sent them to their native places, their villages or at least their districts. I would so much like to return to my dear little village hidden under the coconut palms and the flames-of-the-forest, and live with my mother whom I had not seen for so many years.

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My separation from my mother had been lying heavily on my heart. I was then thirteen. Our region

was subjected to frequent enemy raids. One day, following one of those raids, I got out of my hiding place in the jungle and ran towards the village, which was burning. Amidst the charred beams and collapsed roofs, our thatch hut was among the three or four houses which had remained standing. I found my mother squatting near the hearth, her eyes red with tears, her clothes torn and dirty. She made no gesture to snuggle me to her and looked as if she was trying to avoid my bewildered gaze. Then she gave me some cooked glutinous rice to eat and started putting some of my clothes into a wicker basket. When I had finished eating, she said in a trembling voice, without looking at me, that I was to go and live with my father who was then working at the district as a cadre of the underground administrative committee. She gave me no explanation, and merely said in a sad and weary voice: "Go my child. You'll know the truth one day." Then she broke into a fit of sobbing. I wept for a long time in her arms. My elder brothers and sisters had all taken to the hills. I, the youngest child, had until then lived with my mother, literally tied to her apron strings. "After I have left," I thought to myself, "who would go weeding the terraced field with her? Who would go fetching water for her in long bamboo containers?" Exhausted, I fell into a heavy sleep, ridden with nightmares.

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A few days later, I was asked by Kham But, a cadre of the province, to come and see him. He told me what

I was to do, without paying any attention to my reluctance: I was to serve in a military infirmary both as a nurse and a druggist, on account of the shortage of personnel.

My first contact with the wounded and the sick was quite a shock for me. Until then, I had but theoretical knowledge of diseases and wounds. For the first time, I saw crushed legs, limbs swathed in blood-stained bandages, heads where the bandages left nothing to be seen except the holes for the eyes, bodies prostrate with fatigue or writhing in convulsions. How they must have suffered, those combatants! Most of them were soldiers, the rest voluntary transport workers. They were fighting and suffering for the Lao people, for the Lao fatherland. At the thought that I had been rather reluctant to accept my assignment, I blushed with shame. I felt in my flesh and blood the sufferings inflicted by shells and bullets.

My remorse was mingled with panic, when I had taken stock of the drug situation. Guessing the disarray in my mind, Doctor Monn tried to reassure me:

"Don't worry, Comrade Vi Lam, we'll manage somehow."

I devoted myself body and soul to my new tasks, which were exhausting but at the same time inspiriting. Three nurses, Thao Sung, Kham Sit and myself, had to look after about one hundred patients. We had practically no rest and hardly any sleep. Yet the patients were not satisfied; they even nurtured doubts about our honesty and professional conscience. Once, as I was washing the wound of a man named Bun Thoung, he snapped out angrily:

"Do you believe mere washing would heal this damned wound ? What are you sparing your medicines for ? Am I not worthy of a shot of penicillin ? Tell me, what's this dubious liquid which you are washing my wound ?"

I was thrown into a state of cruel perplexity. How could I tell him that our last drop of mercurochrome had been used the day before and that due to transport difficulties, we had run out of anti-biotics weeks ago ? Getting no answer to his questions, Bun Thoung was all the more angry and flung nasty words at me.

I retreated to an out-of-the-way corner and remained there weeping. Doctor Monn, who happened to pass by, asked me in a gentle voice :

"Some ill-tempered patient has said nasty things to you, hasn't he ?"

I wiped my tears and answered :

"Oh, nothing serious. They blamed me because, having no more antiseptic, I had to wash wounds with a decoction of bamboo and guava leaves."

Monn nodded his approval :

"You have got an excellent idea. We must replace medicines we lack by herbs and roots of which we have plenty."

Courage came back to me. I tried to explain the situation to our patients, who finally agreed to let their wounds be washed with makeshift antiseptics : those proved quite efficacious, fortunately. Bun Thoung himself apologized to me for his rudeness. Every day brought me new joys born of triumph over difficulties and physical exhaustion.

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One day, Boua Lon, a cadre of the district told me:

"The enemy is going to mop up Daknhan, your village."

"Are you sure?" I asked, feeling a pinch in my heart.

"Of course, Vi Lam. That's why I've come here to ask you to return there to help the population foil the raid. The comrades of the province have given their consent."

The news bewildered me almost as much as that of my appointment to the infirmary four weeks ago. I stammered a vague answer. Boua Lon continued:

"Vi Lam, you have carried out revolutionary work in this region. You know it like the back of your hand. The people love you. You will be there like a bird in the bush, like a fish in water. Don't..."

"No, I am not afraid of responsibilities, but I've grown quite fond of my job at the infirmary."

"But you'll come back to the infirmary," Boua Lon had a mischievous smile. "Don't think I am one of those beaux who entice young girls with the music of their *khen** and lure them from their homes for ever!"

Following this conversation, I was to take a group of fifteen guerillas under the command of a man named Kampot to Daknhan to help the population hide their property and cattle in anticipation of the raid. On our way however, we fell into an ambush. An enemy platoon fired at us with two machine-guns. We had seven rifles, and two grenades apiece, plus a carbine

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* A kind of pan-pipe. (Publ.)

for myself. Kampot ordered his men to scatter into small groups, with a rifle and several grenades each. The enemy thought they would sweep us out of existence, but our grenades stopped them dead and they had to dodge about among the trees. I noticed a man hiding behind a mound of earth, firing his sub-machine-gun and shouting "Forward !" to his men. We concentrated our fire on him. When he fell, I clearly saw on him the insignia of a warrant officer.

One of us was seriously wounded. I handed my carbine to a comrade and ran to the wounded man under heavy fire. I heaved him on my back and dodged about among the trees to avoid the fire of an enemy machine-gun. Hardly had I finished bandaging his wounds when another man was hit. I tried to haul him to a safe place, panting and falling at every step.

The fight lasted half an hour. Finally the enemy had to withdraw with three wounded, leaving the corpse of the killed commander.

Seeing blood on my blouse, a comrade cried out :

"Are you wounded, Vi Lam ?"

I shook my head, believing that it was the blood of the wounded which had stained my garment. But the man looked closely at my neck and said :

"You *are* wounded, Vi Lam."

I had probably been hit when crawling towards the second wounded man. Bullets were ripping up the earth quite close to me. I remembered having felt a sharp pain at a given moment, but I had thought it was a cut caused by the sharp edge of a broken branch.

I bandaged my wound and refused to go back. However, after a moment, the pain grew quite sharp, the

wound started bleeding abundantly, and my legs began to give way. So I was taken back to the infirmary with the two wounded men by a small escort. The rest of our group continued their way.

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After my wound was healed, I resumed my job at the infirmary. Going to the district was definitely out of the question.

There was plenty of work to be done, and drug shortage was as acute as ever. My first concern was to try and improve the diet of the patients so as to help them recover their health more quickly. I gave help and advice to the cooks and urged them to do their utmost to give the patients the regimens prescribed by the physicians. In my leisure time I roamed the forest looking for bamboo shoots and wild vegetables, and did some hunting and fishing. I raised two pigs and about twenty fowls for the same purpose.

The clothes of many of the patients had been worn to shreds. I asked the women in the neighbouring villages to come and help repairing them, which they enthusiastically did. This helped boost the morale of the patients, who were deeply moved by the people's solicitude and care.

As I said, we were sorely in need of medicines, even such indispensable ones as drugs against malaria, which affected almost everybody, including the infirmary staff. The few medicines we had, we had to share with the people of the neighbourhood. The idea came

to me of trying to remedy this shortage by having recourse to local herbs and roots. After asking advice from my elder brother, who had just finished his medical studies, I scoured the region collecting recipes from old folk. Encouraged by Kham But, Monn and Thai Deun, I organized a veritable expedition to a faraway forest to collect quinquina liana and other vegetable stuff for making medicaments against malaria, diarrhoea, small-pox, as well as tonics and anti-biotics.

We started out on the road in full rainy season. The rain was coming down in torrents. The impetuous streams of Rbay and Bla were rushing along wildly, carrying everything away in their waters. Sometimes, unable to find a shelter in which to cook our food, we had to munch uncooked rice. The terrain was rough, the slopes steep, the track wound its way through thick jungle. A comrade got a sprained ankle. After trekking for several days, one of us, K., began to feel the stings of discouragement. "It's not at all sure that we should ever reach that forest. And even if we should, it's not certain that we would get what we need there. I was a fool to embark on such a wild venture. We should have asked the Province to give us the medicaments we need. It is not our fault if they are lacking. Our job is at the infirmary, not here."

Trying hard to contain myself, I said to him:

"How could we spare our sweat when the combatants do not spare their blood ?"

K. said nothing, but it was quite obvious that he had changed his mind. At last we reached a corner of the jungle which bore no trace of human life. Although inured to jungle life, we were quite impressed by the

oppressive silence and the exuberant vegetation. A glance convinced us that everything we had dreamed of could be found here: liquorice, ginger, quinquina, etc. We jumped for joy like children at each new discovery. Each of us made an ample collection of medicinal herbs, roots, flowers and fruits.

Our return trip was a triumphant one. In spite of a 30-kilogramme load on my shoulders, which revived the pain of my old wound, I was in high spirits.

When we got back to the infirmary, we all had fits of fever. But we started work at once. We put the herbs in a big pot and boiled them for several days and nights. We took turns at the fireside, trying to maintain a steady fire. The third night, the decoction became quite thick and was soon to be ready for use. But I had to absent myself for a while due to some urgent matter. When I came back, I found Pha fast asleep and there was a smell of burning in the room. Tears welled up in my eyes. Everything had to be started again...

After four days of renewed efforts, the medicine was ready. We decided to try it on ourselves first. Two of my friends and myself who had frequent fits of fever volunteered as guinea-pigs. The results were extremely encouraging. Then we administered a dose to a cadre who had been laid up with fever for a week. The stuff had a terrible taste and it was quite an ordeal trying to swallow it. Yet the patient was quite glad to take it as his condition improved markedly after a few days. When he learned that we had made the medicament ourselves he shook his head incredulously and murmured:

"Wonderful, wonderful!"

Then he tried to get out of his bed, saying :

"I must go to the Provincial Committee to give them the news. It's simply wonderful !"

We told him that this had been done already. We received congratulations from the Committee some time later :

"The making of remedies is nothing extraordinary in an industrialized, well-equipped country. But for us, it takes on an important significance. We were slaves whom the aggressors had robbed of everything : material possessions, freedom, culture... But now we have been freed by the Revolution ; we can do everything. Today we have succeeded in preparing drugs. Tomorrow we shall build a decent life for ourselves and our children."

How can I describe my feelings when I took my pen to inform my mother of my "exploits" ? Poor mother. I had learnt that she had wanted me to leave the village for fear that I should be raped by the mercenaries, as she herself had been. I am quite certain that by devoting myself to my nurse's job, by looking after our wounded and sick fighters, I am doing something to avenge her, too.

SI THOONG THE INVINCIBLE

by THAO BOUN LIN

DECEMBER 1952. French troops launched a mopping-up raid in the Namton valley, at the gate of Vientiane, where the Neo Lao Itsala * had set up a guerilla base. It was a wooded region with deep ravines, where the rough terrain was particularly favourable to guerilla action, which in spite of strenuous efforts the enemy had been able to suppress. This time, the operation was aimed at destroying the provincial services of the Resistance and supply depots and arms workshops, which the enemy believed were in operation somewhere in the jungle.

It was in the ensuing battles that Si Thoong was taken prisoner by the French. A native of the region, the young man, who fought in the ranks of the Pathet Lao, had received the mission of leading a team of three scouts deep into enemy territory. They fell into

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* Front set up by the Lao Resistance movement, the backbone of which was the Pathet Lao.

an ambush set up by a French lieutenant. Si Thoong killed two mercenaires, but his comrades were wounded, and it was while covering their retreat that he was surrounded then captured by enemy troops.

Taken to the French officer, he was slapped, kicked, struck with rifle-butts but did not turn a hair. He kept a stony silence, with a scornful expression on his face. Soon, his body was full of wales and bruises, his clothes were torn to shreds and stained with blood. Still not a word came out of his mouth. He was then taken to the French camp. After a moment of rest the French lieutenant started questioning him again.

"Where are the rice and arms depots ? Where are the provincial services ?" he roared.

Si Thoong calmly answered :

"This country is ours. Our rice depots are in every ricefield and every inhabitant's home. Our ammunition is supplied by your own troops."

The French officer turned pale with rage and set about beating and kicking the young man. When he was tired, he ordered two mercenaries to continue the beating. The two ruffians stepped forward, holding in their hands whips of liana. Si Thoong glared at them :

"You are *Lao*. Why did you take service with the aggressors and why do you beat up your own compatriots ?"

His eyes shone with such anger that the two mercenaries stepped back, intimidated. Beside himself with rage, the Frenchman struck Si Thoong a violent blow on the head with a rifle-butt.

Unable to draw a single piece of information from the young man, the enemy resorted to blackmail. Si

Thoong's mother was arrested and dragged before him. He told her in a calm voice :

"Mother, wipe your tears. I haven't given them the least information on the patriotic forces. If they kill me, any Pathet Lao soldier will replace me as your son."

As the French officer bellowed with rage, ordering the woman to press her son to own up, Si Thoong's mother stepped close to the young man, felt his bruised limbs and broke into sobs.

"Let me cry, my son. I can't help crying seeing your physical sufferings, but never shall I be the cause of your moral distress."

The sight of the cruel tortures inflicted upon Si Thoong wrung the hearts of his fellow-villagers. When evening came, they asked permission to bring him some food. The young man ate only a mouthful of rice and drank a gulp of water. Smiling, he told his friends :

"A thousand thanks ! They have hurt my body so much I can hardly eat and drink. But this mouthful of rice and this sip of water given me by my compatriots will give me enough strength to face all coming trials. Trust me : I am a soldier of the Pathet Lao ; never shall I betray my country and my people."

When night came, Si Thoong was tied to one of the stilts of a hut. With his body aching all over, he still had to suffer the cold and insect bites. But not a moan came from his mouth. Instead, he was heard denouncing the crimes of the colonialists and urging the people to rally under the banner of the Neo Lao Itsala.

Towards midnight, the enemy thought wise to decamp, taking with them the courageous young prisoner.

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The Vientiane hangmen used the whole range of their devilish techniques on Si Thoong : electric shocks, water torture, needles driven into finger-tips... Everything to no avail. He was successively taken to the Chinaimo prison, then to the Central prison. Not a single confession could be drawn from him.

Once, a French torturer showed him a red-hot iron bar :

"If you don't own up, it will eat into your flesh, see?" he said threateningly.

"A Pathet Lao is not afraid of physical pain," Si Thoong replied. "He only fears treason. Now look!"

He took the iron rod in his hands. A smell of burnt flesh filled the room. After a while, the young man, calm as ever, threw the rod at the feet of his torturer. From then on, they left him alone.

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At the beginning of 1954, Pathet Lao forces together with Vietnamese volunteers launched strong attacks in Upper and Middle Laos. The French Expeditionary Corps faced onslaughts on every front of Indochina. Its air force flung itself about without success. The French Command decided to build a new airfied at Vattay, in the suburbs of Vientiane. Si Thoong was among the prisoners detailed to this job.

As soon as he got out of the prison compound, he looked lovingly at the Chanh river and the village on the other bank. A guard asked suspiciously :

"What are you staring at ? Trying to escape, are you ?"

"I am so thirsty," Si Thoong replied. "I would like so much to drink a gulp of this river's water !"

"You fool !" snorted the guard.

It was he who was the fool. He did not understand that what Si Thoong was thirsting after was freedom.

While working, Si Thoong tried to gain the sympathy of the workers. Barely a week later, all of them knew and loved him. Working under a scorching sun was terribly hard : even the guards were exhausted and softened a bit. Sometimes they would give the prisoner workers a lemon or a cigarette.

Together with his prison-mates, Si Thoong drew up a plan of escape.

Day came at last. Towards the end of the afternoon, the free workers left. The seventeen prisoners lingered near the barbed wire fence. Si Thoong told the French lieutenant that they were quite willing to continue work for a while. The officer was so pleased that he promised a reward after work.

Dusk fell when the prisoners stopped working. The guards, who all burned to go home, pressed them to board the lorry which had come to fetch them. Si Thoong stood close to one of the guards, who was carrying a submachine-gun. The French lieutenant tossed two packets of cigarettes among the prisoners : a reward for the supplementary work, he said. Prisoners and guards immediately engaged in a wrangle

over the cigarettes. Availing himself of a favourable moment, Si Thoong struck the guard with his pickaxe and took his gun.

"Go ahead, comrades!" he shouted.

The prisoners jumped on the guards. The French lieutenant took to his heels but was shot dead.

That very night, the seventeen men escaped with their captured arms to a guerilla base.

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A soldier, who had fought under Si Thoong's command, told us the following story:

"I am a native of the same village as Si Thoong. Everybody in our unit held him in high esteem and had the fullest confidence in his commanding ability. At the time when, at the instigation of the Yanks, the reactionaries violated the 1954 Geneva Agreements and attacked the Pathet Lao troops regrouped in Samneua and Phongsaly, Si Thoong was commander of a company of Battalion 605. Under his command, we had scored quite a few victories at Nasala, Keolom, Nacon, Rapet, Phaliou and other places. I still keep a vivid memory of the battle at Nakeng towards the end of 1955. We were caught in an extraordinarily violent artillery pounding. But Si Thoong kept all his sangfroid. He went from platoon to platoon encouraging his men:

"Sit tight, friends!" he said in a cheerful voice. "Those guns of the colonialists make a tremendous lot of noise but do little harm if we know how to take cover."

When the shelling stopped, we saw that indeed it had done us practically no harm. And when enemy infantrymen launched their assault, they were repelled with severe losses. Si Thoong was a crack shot and his bravery was a stimulating example to us all. For four days and four nights, we fought on, repulsing a total of seven assaults.

"Following the signing of the Vientiane Accords (1957) which called for national reconciliation and reunification, Si Thoong and many of us were demobbed. As we bade each other farewell, he said :

'Be vigilant. The Yanks are there. They won't stop giving us trouble.'

"In the months that followed, he kept in close touch with us. One day he sent word for us to come to a place deep in the forest. It was raining hard. Si Thoong looked beside himself with anger. He said :

'Phoui Sananikone has broken the agreement. He has attacked us treacherously. Our leaders * have been flung into prison. The First and Second Battalions of the Pathet Lao are threatened with annihilation. We must take up arms again.'

"He took off his indigo jacket : under, he was wearing his soldier's uniform. This sight galvanized us. Everybody shouted 'hurrah !' and raised his fist.

"Si Thoong organized us into a unit. Later we learned that the Second Battalion had succeeded in breaking the encirclement and escaping into the

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* Several leaders of the Pathet Lao, members of the coalition government, including Prince Souphanouvong, were arrested.

jungle. Si Thoong immediately led us in an attack on the Nalet post. In a lightning assault, we put the garrison out of action and captured all arms and equipment. Vientiane was again possessed of a popular armed unit."

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In December 1960, at the instigation of the Americans, the reactionary forces attacked the capital city. Since the August 9 *coup d'etat,* Si Thoong had been put in command of a unit which assured the defence of Vientiane in cooperation with neutralist forces. He received the order to take his troops south of the city to stop an enemy column coming in from Chinaimo.

It was quite cold. But Si Thoong was hot with anger and the excitement of battle. He had only a shirt and a khaki jacket on his back, and was standing and fuming amidst the ruins brought about by enemy shelling. Here and there, the people had set up barricades in anticipation of street fighting.

When he saw me, Si Thoong said in an excited voice:

"How beautiful our city is, and how I love it! Look! Is there anything more inspiriting than the sight of the city youth and the neutralist forces joining their efforts to those of the Pathet Lao combatants to defend our beloved city?"

After two days of battle, we still held our lines firmly. On the morning of December 13, Phoumi Nosavan's troops supported by Thai, Saigon and

Chiang Kai-shek forces launched renewed furious attacks. Coming from the Thai bank of the Mekong, amphibious armoured cars crossed the river. Other columns advanced along the dykes and Road 13. Si Thoong received the order to wage battle in the centre of the city.

He fought like a lion. Once, we were attacked by enemy infantry supported by two armoured cars. Si Thoong, carrying a bazooka, made his way close to the steel monsters under a hail of bullets and fired two shots which put them ablaze. The enemy assault was foiled.

However, more and more reactionary troops kept coming. The High Command decided to evacuate the city. Si Thoong was ordered to wage rearguard action to cover the retreat of the bulk of our forces. I bade him farewell. He was as calm in the midst of deadly danger as if he were talking to a friend in a bus station. As we withdrew, I saw him standing in a street whose houses were ablaze.

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Si Thoong died a hero's death carrying out his assignment.

When the city was caught in an enemy pincer movement, Si Thoong and his men were holding Vixay pagoda on Road 13. A company of mercenaries supported by two tanks, attacked them. Taking cover behind makeshift barricades, Si Thoong and his troops had but one grenade left apiece. Heavy shelling

blew up the barricades. Si Thoong ordered his men to retreat to Inpeng pagoda, located nearby. It was then that a shell explosion broke both his legs.

Fully aware that he could not survive his wound, he refused to let himself be taken by his men with them.

"You have gloriously fulfilled your mission," he said to them. "Now I order you to retreat. Without me. Leave me your grenades."

Si Thoong's men could not but obey their chief's orders. The situation was highly critical and they had no other alternative. Si Thoong's bravery and selflessness moved them deeply. Many wept.

When his men had withdrawn safely, Si Thoong crawled to a big tree and hid behind it, a grenade in each hand. The tanks were rumbling near, shooting up everything that stirred. The mercenaries shouted to their invisible adversaries to surrender. When they came within range, Si Thoong in a superhuman effort straightened himself up and hurled his grenades at them. A dozen were killed on the spot. Then the tanks opened fire...

Thus fell one of the best sons of the Lao people, who had devoted his whole life to serving the revolution and his fatherland.